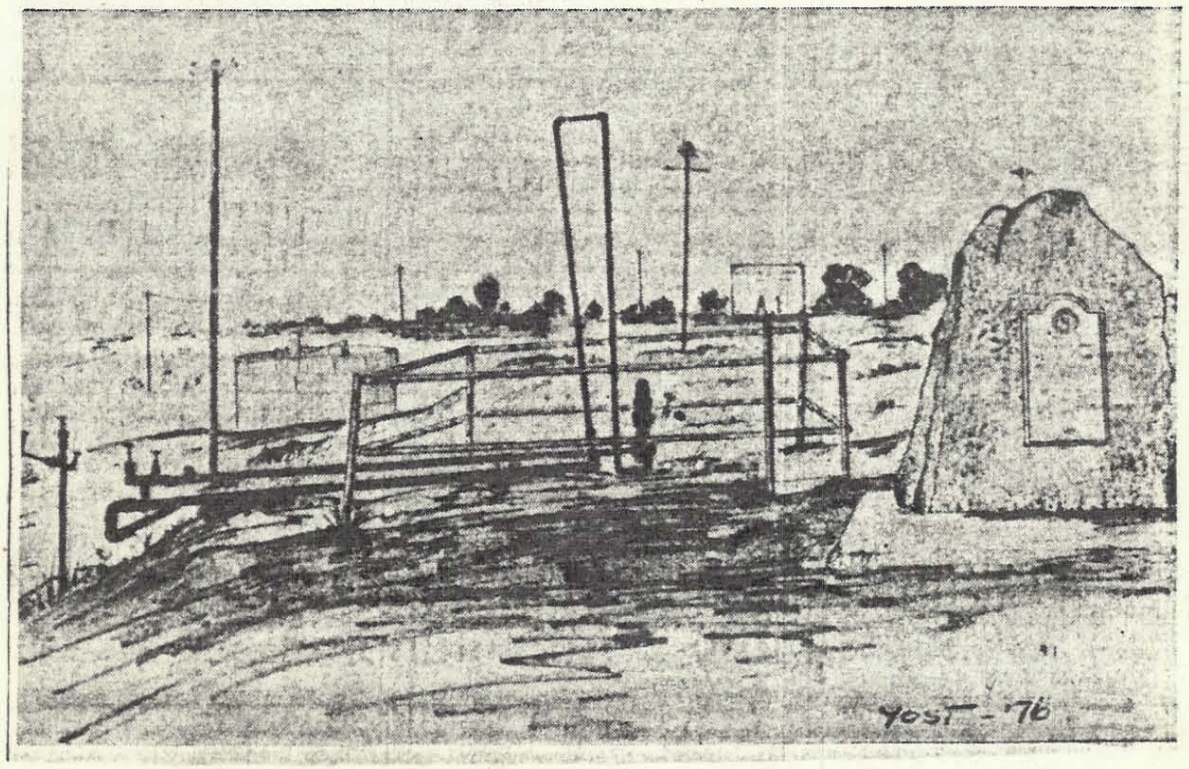
OIL FIELDS

A Brief History Of The Oil Fields At Huntington Beach, California

By

Delbert G. "Bud" Higgins
City Historian, Retired Fire Chief

December 1976



A No. 1

THE OIL WELL THAT STARTED AN OIL BOOM IN HUNTINGTON BEACH

(Historical data compiled by D. G. "Bud" Higgins)

The City of Huntington Beach, which was incorporated in 1909, showed little growth during the period 1914 to 1920. In 1914 there were 1400 people living in the City and the census of 1920 showed 1680 persons. There were few jobs available with the work being mostly seasonable.

Major industries were the Holly Sugar Company, La Bolsa Tile Company, Pearce Cannery, Pacific Oil Cloth & Linoleum company, Beach Broom Company, some housing construction and extensive agriculture.

In 1920 the assessed valuation of the city was $ 2,187,750.00, Bank deposits were $800,000.00, Postal receipts $6,724.00 and the total industrial payroll was $4,000.00 per month.

In 1916 the Standard Oil Company of California was looking for plaees to drill for oil and leased the bluff area at west Newport Beach but decided not to drill in that area. In the employ of the Company was a young Geologist who was studying the coastline and he advised the Company that the high mesa in Huntington Beach might have possibilities. After some persuasion on his part it was decided that a wildcat well would be drilled in the area.

Standard leased part of the 1400 acres of land owned by the Huntington Beach Company and prepared to drill. The location picked by the geoligist Mr. S.M.Gester was west of the City water resorvoir at Goldenwest and Clay Streets.

This was to be the first time in the history of the oil business that an oil field was to be located using the talents of a Petroleum Engineer.

Early in 1919 a rig building crew under direction of W.M.Brown and M.S. Berkey were brought in and erected a 120 foot wooden derrick and installed machinery in preparation for drilling. A drilling crew was put together from Standard leases in the San Jauquin valley and consisted of C.I.Brewster, J.W.Barrett, W.M.Quinn, M.Ellis, G.Hopkins, F.W.Wier, M.S.Spaulding, M.Knudson and W.C. Johnson. An additional Petroleum Geologist Mr. F.O.Blake was assigned to assist Mr. Gester. Most of the crew stayed with the company and became supervising officials. Mr C.I.Brewster eventually became Drilling Superintendant for all Standard Oil operations in California. Years later hundreds of men claimed to have helped drill this discovery well and if so there was a crew of over 1000 men.

A #1 was spudded in in December of 1919 and drilled to a depth of 2199 feet where first indications of oil were found and was further drilled to a depth of 2379 feet where it was decided to place it on production. After several months and 4 cement jobs water was shut off and in May 1920 produced 70 barrels of oil per day.

With proof that oil could be produced in the area a second well was erected about ½ mile westerly from A#1 on the edge of the mesa overlooking the Bolsa Chica Gun Club. This well named Bolsa Chica # I was completed on November 6, 1920 at a depth of 2549 feet. It blew in as an uncontrolled gusher making 1742 barrels of oil and 4,000,000 cubic feet of gas per day. The oil flowed into the low lands and 500 men with mules and scrapers hurriedly erected a dike to hold the oil. The third well was drilled by the Eddystone Oil Company (Now West American) and Called Ashton #1 flowed at the rate of 1300 bbls at 3455 feet deep.

During the period up to 1920 land prices were very low and the Huntington Beach Company, who had subdivided the City, held a one day auction to sell as much property as possible in order to remain solvent. The sudden oil boom caused a rapid increase in prices and most property was taken off the market.

Soon after completion of A#1 property was being leased at $25.00 to $50.00 per acre and rents of $10 to $15 per month. After Bolsa Chica #1 came in prices increased $1,000 per acre bonuses and rents of $40 per acre for the first 90

days per month and $50 thereafter. Most leases called for the property owner to receive one eight of the oil and gas revenues. By the end of 1920 all land within 4 miles of well A#I was under lease by all of the major oil companies and many independants,

By the end of 1920 three wells had been placed on production and produced 43,256 barrels of oil. Note:(at the end of this history a chart of production from 1920 through 1957 will be added. The peak of production in the field was in June of 1923 when 156 wells produced 119,000 barrels of oil per day and 33,813,185 barrels for the year and 41,000,000 cubic feet of gas. This production was worth $50,000,000.00 for the year causing great changes to be made in the area of Huntington Beach.

The population jumped to 6,000 persons,Assessed valuation was now 9,775,000 dollars, Bank deposits 2,500,000.00, Postal receipts 30,000.00, and the payroll was $250,000.00 per month.

There was a vast need for employees to fill all the positions available in the oil field and supporting businesses. People came from all sections of the nation looking for jobs and arrived by train,bus,auto or the sucker busses used to haul prospective buyers of oil stock. It was possible to arrive in the city and be hired and working in 30 minutes. Choice jobs were on the drilling crews as they paid the highest wages.

15 men were required for each rig working on three shifts around the clock and each working a 6 day week. Other needs were for pipe line workers,gas plant workers, tank builders,well pumpers,boiler tenders,well production crews,truck drivers, explosive experts,cement men,supply and equipment men,mule skinners who dug the sump holes with mules and scrapers,rig builders,a great number of engineers and supervisors,full time steam rail crews to handle the continuous strea of oil cars shipping oil out and equipment in on 6 railroad sidings built at clay street. Over night the city became a beehive of activity and the business district rapidly increased in size to supply the needs of the oil field workers. The downtown area supplied the needs for food,clothing and recreation and the rest of the city the needed housing. Many new businesses started over night and soon there were 5 pool halls which served as hiring halls for workers,many restaurants,mens clothing stores, 3 banks,and emergency hospital,cnady stores,drug stores,Ice plant,creamery,creamery, full time western union office,parking garages,bakeries and many neighborhood corner grocery stores. There was a string of small restaurants all the way out main street to garfield.

There was much activity in the freight business at the depot at the foot of main street as the main source of news was the afternoon papers arriving on the big red cars. The railroad operated a small street car hourly from the depot out to the garfield street crossing.

Much of the recreation activities were localized near the pier on the beach front.A dance hall was built inside a large tent and operated 6 nights a week and advertizing "Good Clean Dancing Every Night Except Monday". The old pavilion next to the pier boasted a two lane bowling alley,restaurant and salt water taffey store. The Plunge and bath housed was covered over with a roof,heaters installed and warm water swimming was enjoyed year round. Fishing was excellent from the pier or along the surf as was surf swimming.

With any boom town comes the fast buck people and Huntington Beach was no exeption, Gambling,bootlegging,prostitution and con games were rampant as the city was unable to control them. The area of the main oil boom was in County territory and County Officials spent little time in the area. The City had been policed by a City Marshal and helper who were mostly watchmen and the Marshal was also street Superintendant. Overnight the Marshal's Title was changed to Police Chief and several Police Officers hired to work round the clock keeping the peace. There was need to increase activities of all the city departments due to the load placed on the various city offices. The schools were severely overtaxed for several years until additional buildings were built.

While food ,clothing and recreation needs were easily filled housing was another matter. Oil Companies rented whole hotels and apartments and constructed camps on their leases for their employees but the housing situation was very critical. Men shared a room on shift basis,three men to a room,a great number of shacks and tents sprung up along the bluff next to the beach, Families of 3 or 4 persons rented a room in a private dwelling for several months until they could rent an apartment. The methodist Camp again became a tent city including a grocery store in a tent, A city block of small cabins was built at 5th and main being constructed out of beaver board and was named "Cardboard Alley". One bad lasting effect of the housing boom was the large number of barns and garages behind residential dwellings that were converted to rentals and still exist today.

The critical need for housing was to see several small communities started on the outskirts of the city including the Libert Park tract subdivided by 22 employes of Texaco,The Standard Oil employees tract at Ocean View,Boulevard Gardens, I.N.Carry tract and the Good subdivision in fountain Valley. Hundreds of workers lived in inland cities and commuted by auto or the Jitney busses which ran hourly.

I have mentioned that Con Men and swindlers were flocking in and used various schemes to bilk the public. They purchesed or leased a portoin of land erected a derrick and a large tent and broughtin prospective buyers of shares or stock. Busses ran daily from surrounding cities,the people were given a nice chicken dinner then a big pitch for sales of stock. Small leases were later found to have up to 1000 owners. Many oil workers rode these busses to town,enjoyed the chicken dinner and departed looking for a job.

Along the fringe area of the oil field 10-20 or 40 acre parcels of land were divided into small 25 or 50 foot swuares and sold as part of the lease,some were drilled on but most were outside the producing area.

One group of people who did make a large sum of money from small lots were those who were owners of "EncyclopediaL"ots! In 1916 two salesmen selling encyclopedias in the midwestern states gave a lot with each set of books. These were located on Ellis Avenue and on Golden West in the High producing area. They were leased drilled,and have produced large amounts of oil.

Within 4 years the area of the oil field was defined and included the area from the ocean easterly to the Inglewood Earthquake fault at Ellis and Gothard streets and was divided into 5 separate areas called the Barley Field,Bolsa Area,Garfield Area Main Street,Five Points and surf area and producing from several zones called the Upper and Lower Ashton Zones,Upper and lower Bolsa Zones producing from 2300 feet deep to 4800 feet at the deepest point. The deepest well was drilled by D.W.Weaver on Ellis Avenue near Gothard and was drilled 1900 feet deeper than any other well but found no production below 5200 feet/.

By 1925 other oil booms were in progress in Signal Hill,Santa Fe Springs and Bakersfield and men were leaving for those areas and the population of the city gradually decreased and many businesses left the city.

The area from Ocean avenue to palm streets and from 23rd stree to down town had been closed to drilling during these years and it was the area of most population in the city consisting of fine homes and apartments. By 1926 there there was considerable interest that this area would be good for additional oil production and a petition was passed to open the area from 23rd to 17th streets. Before this petition could be acted on additional ones were submitted and on April 30,1926 restrictions were lifted on this area. The first well completed and placed on production was by Superior Oil Company at 18th and Ocean and was the Jones #1 producing 472 barrels per day. Exploitation was rapid and by December 1926 production was 63,400 barrels from 78 wells. This boom completely upset the city as several hundred homes had to be moved to new locations all over town and to surrounding areas. Daily houses moved over the streets to new locations.

About 50 blocks of houses were moved to new locations particularly the main street area of the city. Downtown fire district #1 was changed to allow substandard houses to be located in that area. The City lost some 300 persons in population in this move decreasing to about 3300 persons. Standard oil was required to build a sea wall to hold back the ocean in order to offset wells along ocean avenue. Within a short time the limits of the boom area were pretty well defined and extended only two or three blocks inland from the ocean and from 23rd street to 8th street. By the end of 1927 drilling had ended but wells were being produced from two levels, the Jones sand and a deeper sand at a lower level of about 4195 feet. In May of 1930 Superior oil Company deepened Babbit #1 and Jones $1 and increased production to 900 barrels per day and these wells were found to be bottomed under the ocean causing many oil men to find a way to drill out under the ocean. It Remained for Harold McVicar to invent a device called the Whipstock which turned the drill bit toward the ocean and bottoming the wells out under the surf line.

This started another boom in 1933 at the height of the depression when little money was available and oil was difficult to dispose of. Dozens of new wells were pushed under the ocean until the State of California, who owned the tidelands, stepped in and after court action signed royalty agreements. Some of these tideland wells had production of more than 2000 barrels per day and very high gas pressure.

The oil boom of 1933 was to see the first use of a taller steel derrick which reduced the fire hazard and being placed on large concrete foundations had no need for guy wires and steam pumping units were giving way to gas power.

All oil men believe their must be a deeper producing zone and John Marion did drill a deep test well on Orange Avenue at 21st street more than 7200 feet with no results.

The townlot boom also brought in many speulators who sold up to 500's part interest in a 50 foot lease which later required much legal effort to clear title to the property and place it back on the tax rolls.

By 1939 a great number of well had been shut down or were small producers called "strippers" and were being sold off to small operators called "Poor Boy Companies" who could operate them alone or help each other to cut down on labor cost and were able keep the wells on production and recover much of the oil left in the ground.

In March of 1938 the State Lands Act was passed to regulate offshore oil development and leasing of tidelands. A lease was made with Southwest Exploration Company to develop the tidelands westerly of 23rd street and drilling began. This was to be the most scientific drilling program ever done in the history of the oil business using Petroleum Geologists and Petroleum Engineers and much new sophisticated instruments to directional drill. Use of cameras, electric logs, and other instruments permitted the area to be platted and wells bottomed exactly as planned allowing each well to produce in the center of several acres. Wells were drilled in strings, each about 600 feet apart and the furtherest being about 1 mile out to sea.

Several other little drilling booms took place including the Five Points boom of 1936, Tar sand Palm avenue boom of 1947, Eastside Deleware avenue boom of 1953 which called for drilling of 5296 foot depth and the Jack Crawford First and Olive boom of January 1955.

The Jack Crawford boom was much like the townlot boom in that it almost completely surrounded the downtown business district. It started at Huntington and Atlanta with completion of when The Brown #1 Was completed in January 1955 at 5306 feet in the main zone and produced 250 barrels of oil. The boom spread to the west to the ocean and north to 10th street. At one time 50 portable drilling rigs were operating in two blocks along second street. Many wells were slant drilled to locations under the business district. Too many holes rapidly reduced production, wells were abandoned and many persons lost mony in this unwise drilling program.

Throughout the whole oil field the new electric log instruments have been used in old wells to examine the structures and find narrow stratas of oil sand and holes are shot in the casing with Gun Perforators to produce oil from several zones and hence recover more oil. Knowing that present recovery methods are near at an end various secondary methods are being tried using fires burning in the bottom of the hols, water flooding where salt water is pumped into the oil formation forcing the oil to producing wells and use of high pressure high heat steam to heat the oil formation.

The larger companies have found they can redrill their wells in small islands, slant drilled under their leases and make use of the surface of the property for modern housing, shopping centers and golf courses rather than having very unsightly oil leases.

The Huntington Beach oil booms have been very kind to the city, schools and taxpayers as they paid 85% of the taxes in the community for a great many years. The City and schools had very low tax rates for all these years and the industry supplied lifetime jobs to thousands of persons. The oil supplied fuel for millions of cars and the gas supplied heat to several million homes. At one time a 12 inch high pressure gas line supplied all the gas used southernly and the City of San Diego.

From 1920 to December 1957 the cumulative production of the Huntington Beach Oil Field was 613,723,624 barrels of oil and 570,574,590 million cubic feet of gas and the reserves still in the ground at that time were estimated to be 47,807,161 cubic feet of gas. The value of the oil, gas and by products of casinghead gas, propane and butane have not been calculated due to shifting prices but it must be noted that one eight of the production went to the property owners.

Starting in 1950 the Fire Department and oil companies embarked on a cleanup program to remove the old wooden derricks and replace them with steel pumping units. In the first year of the program 200 derricks were removed and burned and over a number of years all derricks have been removed and portable well pulling and drilling units used. This has made way for recovery and use of valuable property near the coastline which is fast being built on with apartments increasing the population and use of the beaches.

Attached is a chart supplied by the State Division of Oil and Gas regarding production from 1940 to 1957.

Year	Number of Wells	Production	Tidelands wells	Production
1920	3	43,256		
1921	59	2,558,226		
1922	167	11,179,882		
1923	232	33,813,185		
1924	313	17,335,933		
1925	346	16,303,732		
1925	407	19,248,712		
1926	594	26,364,399		
1927	578	19,652,977		
1928	562	15,948,523		
1929	455	11,210,461		
1930	355	7,755,457		
1931	371	7,924,081		
1932	423	12,931,517	?	3,721,546
1933	470	15,081,047	68	4,906,879
1934	499	15,037,641	86	7,378,071
1935	517	13,206,708	89	5,894,316
1936	568	13,151,936	80	5,094,650
1937	566	11,804,391	81	4,746,745
1938	564	9,925,128	99	4,427,818
1939	574	9,495,775	109	3,799,616
1940	624	10,695,967	116	3,833,136
1941	679	12,000,119	121	4,330,537
1942	690	13,196,898	142	4,639,939
1943	799	17,146,873	163	5,403,738
1944	825	17,603,882	188	9,024,298
1945	871	17,085,965	196	9,998,171
1946	948	18,288,675	212	9,286,679
1947	1121	20,976,611	268	9,438,545
1948	1174	21,016,923	305	11,212,543
1949	1210	20,520,019	347	12,043,568
1950	1301	22,446,785	xxxxxx 400	12,361,562
1951	1393	21,812,853	417	13,945,889
1952	1446	21,273,112	446	13,235,228
1953	1496	21,617,904	501	12,739,970
1954	1732	24,193,498	527	13,204,221
1955	1747	22,466,653	550	13,706,202
1956	1799	21,483,210	550	13,593,419
1957	1779	21,550,00	550	13,382,480
Total Production	613,723,624 barrels		570,574,590 MCF Gas	